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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000089

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/16/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV ELAB PHUM KDEM BA

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH MINISTER OF LABOR AL ALAWI

REF: A. MANAMA 76

1B. MANAMA 68

1C. MANAMA 15

1D. 04 MANAMA 1824

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

11. (C) The Ambassador met with Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Dr. Majid bin Mohsin Al Alawi January 12, just two days before the cabinet shuffle that split the ministry into two separate ministries. The Minister emphasized the importance of the Crown Prince's labor reform initiative and its potential impact on economic growth. The Ambassador and Al Alawi also discussed the registration of international organizations, trafficking-in-persons, the status of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and the activities of opposition political groups. End Summary.

Cabinet Shuffle and Labor Reform

12. (C) In their January 12 meeting, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Al Alawi told the Ambassador that the King would divide the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) into two ministries and appoint him as the Minister of Labor (Ref B). He expressed satisfaction with the change, saying it would allow him to focus on advancing the Crown Prince's labor reform initiative (Ref D). He indicated that in order to transition to an economy less reliant on petroleum, Bahrain must restructure its labor market. Bahrain cannot solve its economic problems in traditional ways and must embrace forward-looking ideas. He noted that a huge change in attitude is not easy to achieve, but Bahraini business is taking an increasingly favorable view of labor reform.
(Comment: Embassy experience in recent weeks suggests that Bahraini business people are not on board. End Comment.) Companies realize that to attract new clients and compete globally, they must invest in their human capital. Al Alawi reported that household workers would not be exempt from the law, which will require a monthly payment by employers into a fund to support training for Bahraini workers. He stated that the GOB hoped the draft labor law would be fully implemented by the beginning of 2006. Al Alawi agreed with the Ambassador that the Crown Prince has garnered much respect and regional interest by putting the labor reform issue on the table. He reported that during this year, all ministries will have an opportunity to comment on the draft law before its presentation to Parliament, which is expected to debate it thoroughly. The Minister said labor reform would boost trade, and he re-affirmed the GOB's support of the U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement.

IOM Registration for TIP Project

13. (C) The Ambassador told the Minister that the USG is very concerned that the GOB has not yet approved the registration of a G/TIP-sponsored International Organization for Migration (IOM) program in Bahrain. He said the IOM representative was in Bahrain for four months awaiting formal registration. The Ambassador pointed out that Congress mandates an annual TIP ranking for certain countries, including Bahrain, and the IOM program would be a good symbol of Bahrain's commitment to combating trafficking-in-persons. Minister Al Alawi agreed, but said he was unaware of the registration issue. (Note: Bahraini law does not allow for the registration of international organizations (IOs), only local NGOs. In what is often a long process, any IO conducting a project in Bahrain must get special permission from the GOB to operate. End Note.) The Minister said he would pass the issue on to the new Minister of Social Affairs and hoped IOM would be registered soon. Al Alawi highlighted several of the GOB's achievements in combating trafficking-in-persons in the last year, such as the prosecution of TIP-violating employers and the registration of the Migrant Workers Protection Society (Ref C). (Note: The Ambassador will request a meeting with newly-appointed Minister of Social Affairs Dr. Fatima Al Belooshi to follow up on this issue. End Note.)

The Bahrain Center for Human Rights

14. (C) The Ambassador mentioned the recent decision of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) to resume its activities in defiance of the GOB's closure of the center (Ref A). Al Alawi stated that he thought this was ill-advised and did not understand why the BCHR would choose to resume activities while its case contesting the closure is still in the courts. The Minister warned that if BCHR members break the law, they will be punished. He claimed the BCHR had violated the societies law and indirectly incited violence by calling for the death of the Prime Minister. Al Alawi maintained that the BCHR was not much more than a few "hotheaded" figures controlled by former political exiles who still reside in London. Human rights organizations should be neutral. (Comment: Some of Al Alawi's annoyance may come from the fact that he himself was an active member of the Shia opposition in exile in London until he accepted the King's amnesty and became a minister in 2002. End Comment.) The Ambassador replied that the role of human rights groups is to critique governments from time to time, and that the international community will inevitably react when they are closed.

Opposition Groups and Participation in the 2006 Elections

15. (C) The Ambassador noted there appeared to be indications that at least some Shia oppositionists are warming up to the idea of participating in elections. Al Alawi confirmed this, and said political participation and respect for human rights are the keys to stability. When asked about opposition group Al Wifaq's decision to hold a constitutional conference in February, Al Alawi replied that the opposition should not bypass Members of Parliament or try to force legislation on the King. Al Alawi said he and other ministers would meet with Al Wifaq's leadership soon. He will tell them that if they want to change things in Bahrain, they should participate in next year's elections and not work outside the system.

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